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HENRY PITNEY VAN DUSEN

The World Church II Younger Churches

TRIENNIAL MEETING • 1943

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The Younger Churches

HENRY PITNEY VAN DUSEN

IT often has been suggested that God's greatest difficulty with us is not the blackness of our vices but the palidness of our virtues. And some one has pressed the point a step further by adding that the real problem lies not so much in the perversity of our wills but in the feebleness of our imaginations.

When that dour Scots barb, Rabbi Burns, one Sabbath morning in church noted an unmentionable insect crawling up the proud bonnet of the fashionably attired worshipper in the pew ahead and sighed:

Oh wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as others see us!

he was merely longing for the imagination to see things, and especially ourselves, as other human beings see them. But upon us as Christians is laid a more difficult and demanding stretch of imagination: to attempt to see things, all things, with a divine perspective, as God sees them.

Here our goal is, for the space of an hour or so, to try to think of our world as God Himself views it. This, of course, we cannot possibly manage. But there is a person, neither divine nor human, himself a creation of imagination, who may help us in the feebleness of our imaginations. He is that creature of fable, the Man from Mars. I should like to invoke his assistance. Let us imagine the Man from Mars descending upon this planet at three particular moments in the past century: April 11, 1814, the day of Napoleon's abdication; August 3, 1914, the opening of the first World War; and today, with the special purpose of studying the Christian Church in the world at those three periods. What would he have noted?

1814: CHRISTIANITY OBVIOUSLY DOOMED

THE Visitor from Mars who had visited this planet at the dawn of the Nineteenth Century would hardly have entertained good hopes for the future of Christianity. For more than a century previous, in both faith and life the Christian Church had suffered deepening strain, weakness, and loss. In area after area of the world to which Christian missionaries had ventured in the preceding era of vigor and expansion, their fragile young Churches sickened and died. In Latin America, the scene of most striking recent advance, Spanish and Portuguese adventurers who had sought to subdue a continent under the joint auspices of sword and cross had wasted their strength through lust and greed, and had brought corruption and bad repute upon the Roman Catholic missions which their conquests had

planted. Australia and New Zealand and indeed most of the unnumbered inhabited islands of the Pacific as yet knew nothing of Western culture and religion. In Japan, Christianity had been driven wholly underground. In China and Korea, persecution almost destroyed the weakling Christian communities. Here and there, along the seacoasts of Africa, in India and Ceylon, at a few centers in Malaya and Indo-China, on certain Pacific islands, small and seemingly unimportant Christian outstations might be discovered. Moreover, these Christian missions were usually spiritual adjuncts to the outposts of European military and economic control. Christianity was still quite definitely a European faith. Its fate as a world religion appeared linked to the future of European conquest.

But, throughout Europe, the Church was speedily losing its hold upon the common people; its claim to the support of the educated and privileged classes seemed already gone. John Buchanan, describing the state of religion in Scotland during Sir Walter Scott's boyhood says:

"One party made religion a thing of social decency and private virtues. . . . The other party . . . disputed chiefly on questions of church government. . . . The Church in Scotland was a Church from which most that was vital in the national life was deeply estranged."

Much the same conditions prevailed on this continent. Many Americans of today have a quite false impression of the influence of religion upon the childhood of our nation. The period of the Revolution and after was not notable as an age of faith. There is a famous record that in Yale College in an early year of the Nineteenth Century, not a single student could be discovered who would admit he was a Christian. Meantime, the only civilization was concentrated in tiny white settlements fringing the Atlantic seaboard. Beyond, stretched clean across the continent a vast Indian population virtually untouched by Christianity. In the midst of the white settlements dwelt a

rapidly increasing population of Negroes still largely heathen.

Such were the condition and outlook for Christianity at the close of the Napoleonic Wars. These facts could hardly have failed to paint the main features of the picture for the Man from Mars. As he turned away for the return flight to his planetary habitat, he might have left a sympathetic message of condolence for the leaders of a movement which once had seemed to possess such vitality, such promise for mankind, but which obviously was now doomed to unimportance, possibly to extinction.

1914: CHRISTIANITY, A WORLD RELIGION

Now, let us imagine this same Man from Mars in his perennial youth, or his great-grandson, returning for a second visit just a century later.

At the outbreak of the next great international conflict in 1914, Christianity had become the faith of the Western Hemisphere, the whole of the vast continents of North and South America with their more than 200,000,000 people. In the Pacific Ocean basin, the continents of Australia and New Zealand and certain of the lesser islands were inhabited by predominantly Christian populations. In Africa, Christianity had worked inland from the seacoasts to establish many sizable and vigorous churches among the native tribes. Indeed, at least some beginnings of a firmly founded native Church were to be found in every country on the face of the earth except two. Only Afghanistan and Tibet still forbade admission to Christian missionaries.

Perhaps most noteworthy of all, among the most advanced peoples of Asia, those most deeply rooted in ancient and mature Oriental cultures, India, China, Japan, although the Christian movement counted in its membership a tiny minority of the populations (not more than two or three per cent at

most), it was flourishing under the ever more vigorous leadership of native Christians whose influence upon the thought and life of their nations was all out of proportion to their numbers. In these lands, Christianity was generally recognized as a factor of first importance for the physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual advance of their peoples. Thus, Christianity had become at last, for the first time in the nineteen centuries of its history, a world religion. More than that: there had emerged the promise of a Christian faith which should be truly universal, embracing men and women of every race and culture and stage of civilization, from the crudest tribesmen just wrested from cannibalism to the most cultured and sophisticated descendants of sages who had achieved civilization centuries before Christ and millenia before our ancestors left their tree huts.

By any reasonable test which might be proposed, the Nineteenth Century was by far the greatest in Christian history. In terms of geographic expansion, it had reached to the ends of the earth, penetrating every continent and touching almost every people. In terms of numerical growth, the Church had multiplied its membership many fold, many times more rapidly than the normal increase in population. In terms of influence upon the whole life of humanity, Christian ideals and spirit had effected greater reforms and improvements in the lot of all sorts and conditions of men than had ever been known in any previous epoch of history.

These were some of the facts which would have impressed the Martian Visitor as he turned his face homeward again. Had he been leaving a message for his Christian friends, surely it would have been one of amazement, of congratulation, of high hope. Must we not suppose that he would have chafed impatiently until he should come again to observe further advances by this astounding movement, much the most vigorous and remarkable which this earth had ever seen.

Now, let us assume our imaginary visitor returning to the earth today, in the year 1943. What observations might he report? What message of comment and advice would he be likely to offer, especially against the background of his earlier visits? What have three decades of war, respite, regirding, and war renewed done to the Church throughout the world?

Almost certainly, his attention, like our own, would be captured first of all by the immediate situation. Here the date from which changes are to be measured is not August 3, 1914, but September 1, 1939, the outbreak not of World War I but of World War II.

TRANSFORMATIONS WROUGHT BY WAR

Undoubtedly, his initial impression would be the catastrophic transformations wrought by the sweep of this war. First, through the cutting off, in the summer of 1940, of roughly one-eighth of all Protestant missionary work in the world from the European Churches of their origin and support. Then, since Pearl Harbor, through the conquest by Japan of virtually the whole of Eastern and Southeastern Asia and most of the islands of the Pacific. This vast area, now completely under Japanese domination, embraces the homelands of approximately one-fourth of those who have been brought into the Christian Church by the great missionary outreach of the previous hundred years—some two million Protestant Christians. Only ten per cent of these are to be found in Japan. But today, every aspect of this quarter of the Church Overseas—6,500 missionaries, ten thousand schools and colleges, five hundred hospitals, work normally sustained by almost ten million dollars annually from Europe and America in the Philippines, Korea, Manchuria, Occupied China, Indo-China, Siam, Burma, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, much of Melanesia and Poly-

nesia—are within the military and political control of the Japanese Empire. The native leaders of those Churches, bereft for the most part of their missionary friends and counsellors who have been evacuated or interned, may look to no one for protection, advice, and assistance except to fellow-Christians from Japan, their conqueror and oppressor.

Take a single illustration, chosen both because it involves the largest numbers and because it is so little known to Americans. That vast island archipelago which stretches like a jeweled girdle along the Equator eastward across the Pacific from Singapore a distance greater than the width of North America and which most of us two years ago might have been embarrassed to locate on the map, the Netherlands East Indies, contains the largest and in many respects the most remarkable Christian community in that part of the world. The Christians in these islands outnumber those in all other countries of the Orient combined—most of them hardly more than a single generation removed from primitive barbarism. With a few minor exceptions, all Protestant work in Holland's vast island empire was in charge of Dutch and German missionaries. In the spring of 1940, almost in a day as Holland was overrun, all channels of communication and support from their mother Churches were severed. Then, early in 1942 as the Japanese forces swept over them, they and their missionary leaders were brought under Japanese captivity.

This is just one illustration of what has happened all over the world, first where German victory in Europe has cut off contact between parent Churches and their youthful offspring, and then where Japanese conquest in Asia has brought both missions and Christians under her rule.

Christians are always loathe to admit that the destiny of Christ's Church can hang on political changes, especially military outcomes. Yet history forces us to that admission. Here is a vivid contemporary proof.

But our Visitor from Mars would almost certainly add a second observation: the fashion in which these catastrophic changes wrought by war have been met by those most directly and greviously affected. And under each of the two circumstances mentioned.

The missions cut off in the summer of 1940 from all contact with home, all normal sources of support, are scattered in forty countries on almost every continent; 120 missions in all, each not an individual mission station but the work of a great Church in an entire nation or area. Orphaned Missions, they have been well called. This was a catastrophe striking separate Christian centers here and there across the earth's surface. Obviously only the health of the whole organism of world Christianity could save these isolated cells from death. But was there sufficient unity within the World Church? Or was the term organism which we so often use merely a figure of hope rather than an actuality? Within a very few weeks, a simple yet comprehensive scheme was developed through which Christians in lands still free and able to help could send their gifts into a central treasury, and from there funds could be sliced out across the face of the earth to the points of need.

To compress a long and thrilling story into a single sentence: In the past four years, Christians in tens of thousands of parishes in twenty free countries all over the world have been sending their contributions to the Orphaned Missions Fund, and the sizable reservoir of some three million dollars thus provided has discharged help through 120 channels to destitute Christian communities in forty countries on six continents. Aid has been given without any regard to race or creed or denomination, but only upon the basis of need. These lines of intake and outflow cross all traditional barriers of theological and denominational cleavage and the far more impassable

chasms of present political enmity. Not one plea for aid has gone without response of help. Not one missionary has been withdrawn or one mission closed through lack of funds. There has been "no overlapping and no overlooking." It is the greatest instance of mutual help among Christians since those earliest days when the tiny Christian communities in Palestine held all possessions in common. It is the most notable concrete demonstration of the underlying unity of Christ's Churches which has been given in the whole of Christian history.

But what of those vast areas under Japanese conquest where now even contact with the free Christian world is no longer possible, and all missionary counsellors of the native Christians are subject to internment? Over that whole territory there hangs a pall of silence. Yet through it there flash occasional pictures which give us some impression of what is taking place. It is unmistakably clear that those native Christian people, so many of them just lifted from savagery, are rising to their desperate predicament with a heroism, ability and devotion which amaze and shame the most affectionate expectations of their missionary friends. In country after country, they themselves are taking over responsibility for schools and hospitals and orphanages and leprosaria and publications heretofore financed and directed wholly by foreigners. In some places, they are launching forth on hitherto unprecedented evangelistic efforts. They are maintaining not only their own Christian life and work, but also the missionaries who are now wholly without contact with the rest of the world. Thus is being given a demonstration of the maturity and the profound Christian loyalty of these youngest, least experienced and least privileged of Christ's Churches.

Again, a single illustration must suffice—chosen, likewise, both because of its representative importance and because it comes to us from a spot of which most of us are sadly ignorant. In the island of Sumatra, among the remote mountains in its

northern tip, dwells a people of Malayan race and of exceptional vigor and spirit. The Bataks number about one million. In 1861, a German missionary penetrated the jungles and inaccessible mountains, discovered them and began Christian work among them. In less than eighty years, a Church of over 400,000 Bataks, nearly half the population, had been built up —almost the largest proportionately and the strongest youthful Christian Church in the world. Although less than three generations removed from primitive barbarism, these Batak Christians had long demonstrated great independence of spirit and some restiveness under the paternalism of their German missionary sponsors. On May 10, 1940, the entire German staff was interned. Just one Dutch missionary remained. Grave alarm excited both German and Dutch mission circles. A Dutch leader flew to Sumatra to take charge. But the Batak Christians took a different view of the situation. At last, the long-coveted freedom had suddenly been thrust upon them. "A hundred per cent independence" became their rallying cry. They summoned a great synod to which came native Christians, mostly laymen, from all through the mountains. A new Church was formed and native leaders elected. Full responsibility was assumed for all the manifold enterprises of the Christian mission among them.

Then, a year and a half later came Japanese conquest. In all probability, all Dutch advisers were removed, and these Batak Christians were thrust wholly upon their own resources for the maintenance and direction of the largest and most vigorous but almost most immature Church in that part of the world. May we not think of their year and a half of experimental independence under the rather sceptical observation of missionaries as providential preparations for the far more severe testing which they are today suffering? Shall we doubt that, when the Japanese tide is rolled back and again it is possible for representatives of the World Church to go to Batak-

land, they will discover a Church more numerous and more vigorous by all they have passed through?

This, also, is simply an illustration of what is happening at unnumbered unnamed points over the earth.

There is one further chapter in this part of the story, a manifestation unsurpassed of the reality and unity of world Christianity. It is clear that, in many places, both native Churches and missionaries are being succoured and sustained by fellow-Christians of the "enemy" nation. Recently from the capital of the Netherlands East Indies came a cryptic message reporting that Dutch missionaries there were free and well and able to continue their work "through the help of the friends of K. A. Gawa."

THE STRENGTH OF THE YOUNGER CHURCHES

Another observation our Martian visitor would report from Asia. Not only the unsuspected and unforeseen strength, valor and devotion of these immature Christian communities, but the hardly less noteworthy record of younger Churches which had already come of age when war overwhelmed them. It is precisely within the two nations with which this World War originated, and which have endured its fury for more than six years, that there have taken place developments, in many respects the most remarkable, and perhaps the most important for the future of Christianity in the world.

The record of the Christian movement in China is by now too well known to require or bear repetition: the significance of the Christian leaders of China for her survival and her indomitable resistance. The saga of the Christian schools and colleges of China as they, together with the national educational institutions, have suffered expropriation, pillage, and destruction of their lovely campuses; have piled books and microscopes upon rickshas; have treked, faculty and students together, overland across rivers and mountains, sometimes

several thousand miles, sometimes on several successive exiles; have set up classrooms, laboratories, and dormitories in warehouses, abandoned temples, even in mud caves; and are today carrying on. In this year when our universities are almost stripped of all normal education, there are more men and women pursuing regular university education in China than in any previous year of her history. It is the most remarkable chapter in the age-long chronicle of man's quest for truth and learning; and in it all the Christian schools have had a noble leadership. The mostly unheralded heroism of countless missionaries who have risked disease, privation, and death to stand unmoved as the Japanese hordes have swept on, and who minister to the destitute and wounded, rescue the abandoned, and plead for the innocent—win the reverent gratitude of the whole Chinese nation. The simple fidelity of thousands of Chinese Christians, uprooted from homes and possessions and driven into an unfamiliar hinterland, who there start life afresh and there build a new Christian sanctuary. Above all, the incredible spirit of these Christian Chinese—patient, almost free of hatred, faithful, bountiful.

From far out on the Tibetan border beyond the Burma Road comes a message from perhaps the most distinguished leader of the Episcopal Church in China, Dr. Francis Wei, president of Hua Chung (Central China) College, now exiled in Western Yunnan. The message is addressed to a leader of the British Churches:

"During this Christmastide, our thoughts often turn to the suffering in London and other parts of Great Britain, particularly among our fellow Christians in the Churches. You have been going through in your country the sufferings of war as we have been undergoing them for the past four and a half years, except perhaps on a larger scale. You have our sympathy and our remembrance in our prayers.

"At Christmas in our refugee college this year we decided

to make our Christmas offerings a gift to the Churches in Great Britain which have suffered from the war. Our collections amounted to Chinese $960.65. . . . This is a mere token of our Christian sympathy and fellowship, and I hope you will accept it for the Churches of England from the Christian community in Hua Chung College. We wish that the gift might have been larger but our community is small, and particularly at a time like this we are not able to give much. We are sending it to you with our prayers and with the season's greetings."

But it has been given to the Christians of Japan to have thrust upon them perhaps the gravest trials and most testing temptations faced by Christians of any nation in our day.

Shortly before Pearl Harbor, they found themselves driven, partly by government persuasion, partly by the exigencies of their situation, but also partly in fulfillment of long-cherished hopes, to make two radical changes in their Church life: to free themselves from all dependence upon foreign support, and to unite all their many Protestant bodies, inherited from our Western divisions, into a single Church of Christ in Japan —all Protestant bodies except two, Seventh Day Adventist and Episcopal churches. The whole Christian world regarded these drastic measures with grave misgiving. Then, before there had been time for the new independence to establish firm foundations, Pearl Harbor interned all missionary advisers who remained and cut the Japanese Christians off, not only from support from abroad, but even from all communication with the rest of World Christendom. What would this do to the new and fragile Church of Christ in Japan?

As anticipations have been succeeded by actualities, forebodings have had to make way for admiration and thanksgiving. It would not be possible that changes, so sudden, so radical, would fail to have some unhappy results. But, on the whole, the Christians of Japan have risen with almost miraculous zeal and devotion to take over support of our mission

work, to launch new campaigns of evangelism, to press out to the far-flung fringes of Japanese military control with concern for harassed and often destitute fellow-Christians there. More than that. Although completely insulated from direct contact with the World Church, it is obvious from news that seeps through that they are actually strengthening the ecumenical character and loyalty of their new Church. Even the Episcopalians have joined the united Church of Christ in Japan! And that Church has successfully resisted every device of government pressure to turn it into an instrument of national aggrandizement, and has declared its membership in and loyalty to the universal Church of Christ. One especially striking concrete evidence of this we have already cited.

What a glorious paradox that in the very hour when the Christians of Japan must suffer alienation and isolation from virtually all the rest of Christendom, there are given to them these two great pioneering and prophetic tasks in behalf of that universal Church: the first of the younger Christian Churches to come to full independence and self-support; the first Christian community in any land to form one visible organic Body of Christ for the whole Protestant population of an entire nation!

THE CHURCH: A WORLD COMMUNITY

In conclusion, are there any more general and fundamental conclusions which our hypothetical observer from Mars might leave with us to guide our thought as we look into the future?

From the record of the Christian Churches under trial, both the Churches of Europe and the Churches of the mission field, four facts stand forth:

1. It is a record of Churches rather than of individual Christians, and of individuals only as they speak and act as Church-

men. Only a great corporate reality can struggle effectively against demonic corporate might. Only a great corporate reality can stand securely amidst the disintegration of war and revolution. Only a great corporate reality can count significantly in an age of global conflict and mass movements.

2. It is a record of all Christian Churches alike: conservative and liberal, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist. In Europe, one of its most remarkable by-products has been unprecedented coöperation between Christian communions and parties heretofore estranged. Indeed, in general, the success of Christian resistance has been directly proportionate to the massed unity of all Christian groups. Throughout the mission lands, it is even more markedly a record of Churches united. It is not a record of any one communion but of them all together—indeed, of any one only in the measure that its particular life and work has been caught up within, strengthened and made secure by the unity of all. In days of peace and optimism, Bishop Brent declared "The world is too strong for a divided Church." How much more true today. Nothing less than the whole Christian community is able to "withstand, and having done all to stand."

As a son of the Episcopal Church, an affectionate albeit somewhat prodigal son, will you allow me to say that there is no Church which more needs to take that lesson to heart? This Church has been doing quite superlative missionary work, here and there; although, we all would feel, an insignificantly tiny work in view of the wealth and privilege of this Church. No individual achievements of the Christian mission surpass St. Paul's University and the great medical center in Tokyo, St. John's University or Francis Wei's Hua Chung College in China, doubtless also certain small centers in Africa and Latin America. But it must be confessed in all truth that today these would be of almost no significance were they not parts of the

total World Christian Mission. Apparently the Episcopal Church of Japan could be saved from annihilation only by losing itself in the Church of Christ in Japan. The fruits of decades of heroic work in Occupied China would have been wiped out had they not been preserved within the larger reality of the Christian Movement there. And all together would have gone down without the support of World Christianity.

3. It is a record of Christians and their Churches, living, acting, and standing steadfast always under vivid consciousness of their membership in a World Community. In a profound sense, this is a record not of individual Churches or national Churches but of a World Church.

4. It is a record of a World Community brought into being as a direct result of the Christian World Mission. In words of the Archbishop of Canterbury, now wearing threadbare through repetition:

"As though in preparation for such a time as this, God has been building up a Christian fellowship which now extends into almost every nation, and binds citizens of them all together in true unity and mutual love. No human agency has planned this. It is the result of the great missionary enterprise of the last hundred and fifty years. Neither the missionaries nor those who sent them out were aiming at the creation of a world-wide fellowship, interpenetrating the nations, bridging the gulfs between them, and supplying promise of a check to their rivalries. . . . Almost incidentally, the great world-fellowship has arisen from that enterprise. But it has arisen; it is the great new fact of our time. . . .

"Here is one great ground of hope for the coming days. . . . It is of urgent importance that we become aware of it, that we further it in every way open to us, and that through it we take our part in providing for the Spirit of Christ the agency by which He may transform the world."

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